

4.1 Introduction

The Middle English (ME) period is typically characterized as one of great change, both social and linguistic: the ancient Germanic structures of Old English and of Anglo-Saxon society were tempered with, or displaced by, the Romance influences of the Norman duchy and the Parisian court; and the seeds of modern English society, and of modern English language usage, were sown. The event often cited as a starting point for this transitional period is the Norman Conquest of 1066, which effectively put England into the hands of new and foreign overlords, starting with William, Duke of Normandy. If putting 1066 at the beginning of a timeline of change for the Middle English period gives the impression that English society was calm and peaceful until the Conquest, or that the ascendance of Norman kings to the English throne was an unprecedented surprise to a free Anglo-Saxon nation, then it is worth noting that this was not the case. As we saw in Chapter 3, England had passed into Scandinavian hands at the end of the Old English period, effectively making it a province in a much larger Viking empire. This displacement of the older Anglo-Saxon ruling families, in particular the line of Alfred, plus the resentment in some circles at being ruled by ‘foreign’ kings (related but nevertheless foreign) meant that England of the late OE and early ME periods was a hotbed of political conspiracy in relation to issues of succession. Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians were not the only ones embroiled in these intrigues – Emma, the widow of the Anglo-Saxon king Æthelred and wife of the Scandinavian king Cnut, had originally come from Normandy. She and her sons maintained close relations with her connections there, adding yet another dimension to questions of overlordship in England. Thus, the socio-political turbulence that characterizes the ME period had its roots, in large measure, in the quarrels and machinations of the ruling classes in late Anglo-Saxon England.

In terms of language, we would also be wrong in assuming that English remained fairly static until 1066. It is unquestionable that the English of the ME period came to look very different from its Anglo-Saxon antecedent, and that the introduction of Norman French speakers and scribes to England played a role in this. It is, however, important to remember that change also occurred simply through native intergenerational transmission. Features often taken as characteristic of Middle English varieties had begun to emerge long before the Conquest: reduction of inflectional paradigms, for example, had its roots in the

ongoing syncretism of the OE period (see Chapter 3). The events of 1066 therefore did not so much begin a period of transformation as add another dimension to the direction of ongoing linguistic (and indeed social) change in the ME period. As we will see in this chapter, the exact nature of those linguistic changes has been a source of contention in analyses of Middle English.

We begin our exploration of this period with the socio-historical background in Section 4.2.

4.2 Social History

As stated in Chapter 3, the Anglo-Saxon period drew to an end with the ascendance of Danish kings to the English throne. Four years into his English reign, Cnut inherited the kingdom of Denmark from his brother, and effectively became ruler of an impressive Balto-Danish empire. Although England was ultimately only a province in this much larger body, Cnut made it his base and devoted a great deal of his energies to ensuring that the political stability and prosperity enjoyed under rulers such as Alfred continued. Cnut shrewdly ran ‘England the English way’ (Schama, 2000: 70–1), letting the already established councils and governments get on with doing what they had been doing for centuries, and doing well. He also built up a cohort of trusted English advisors including the Earl Godwine, one of Cnut’s closest confidants and one of the most richly rewarded in land and title. When Cnut died in 1035, Godwine was very likely one of the most powerful men in England.

With Cnut’s demise, the English lost a capable ruler and gained a succession problem that threatened to shatter the 20 years of peace that the old king had established. Cnut had had a son, Harold, with his first wife Ælfgifu, and another son Harthacnut with his second spouse, Emma of Normandy. Emma’s previous marriage to Æthelred (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2), had borne two sons, Alfred and Edward, both of whom had been sent to Normandy with the resumption of Viking raids at the end of the tenth century. All four of these offspring had legitimate claims to the throne, which did not automatically pass to eldest sons in Danish or Anglo-Saxon law. Decisions of kingship were made by the *witan* (the national council comprising secular and spiritual leaders) who, in this case, named Harold as Cnut’s successor.

Alfred and Edward were not initially inclined to forgo their claim: a decision perhaps encouraged by the territorialist sensibilities of the Norman society that had fostered them. The Normans (the label derives from the Old French for ‘Northmen’) were descendants of Viking invaders who had employed the same intimidatory tactics on France as their kin had on ninth-century Anglo-Saxon England (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2). King Charles the Simple of France had reached terms with the Viking leader Hlófr (or Rollo), granting him and his band the crescent of territory in north-western France that now bears their name. Hlófr became the first duke of Normandy, and his great-great grandson, William, would extend the realm to England.

In the five or so generations that separated Hlófr and William, the Vikings had assimilated in significant measure to their French ‘host’, ‘trading in their

longboats for war-horses and . . . stud-farms in Normandy itself . . . the old Norse halls [for] motte-and-bailey castles' (Schama, 2000: 73), and the old Norse gods for the Catholic Church. They also became French speakers, although their variety, known as Norman French, retained Scandinavian influences. But the desire for conquest and land which had driven their forefathers remained, and Emma's sons may well have been encouraged by their Norman guardians to stake their claim to the English throne. In 1036, they arrived in England to consult with their mother on this prospect. Edward, more politically sensitive than his brother, managed to escape the hostility to his claim by returning to Normandy. Alfred, however, stayed – a decision that cost him his life at the hands of Godwine and Harold's men.

Harold died in 1040 and was succeeded by his half-brother Harthacnut, who reigned for only two years. On the *witan*'s recommendation, the remaining heir, Edward, was crowned King of England on Easter Day 1043.

Edward's reign was not without personal strife. His mother Emma, for example, explicitly supported the claim of another contender, the Norwegian king Magnus I, to the English throne, and the powerful Godwine, who had engineered the murder of his brother, was a necessary ally. But Edward never lost his animosity to Godwine, nor his sense of affiliation with his Norman kin. It is highly likely that he knew the young William (titled *the Bastard* as the illegitimate son of Duke Robert of Normandy and Herlève, a tanner's daughter) while in Normandy, and may well have maintained contact with him. Edward also built up an entourage of Norman supporters to whom he granted English land and titles. Indeed, with his nephew Earl Ralf (son of his brother Alfred), Edward created 'a little Normandy' in Herefordshire, complete with Norman castles and knights (Schama, 2000: 77). The speculations of modern historians that Edward was deliberately laying the foundations of a Norman succession are therefore unsurprising, but it is equally likely that Edward was attempting, in the face of powerful potential enemies such as Godwine, to buffer himself with loyal subjects.

In the later years of his reign Edward turned increasingly to religion, adopting the ascetic lifestyle that would mythologize him as a miracle-worker and healer, and lead to the title he is known to posterity by, *the Confessor*. He died childless in 1066, and the end of the previous year was recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as being one of tremendous natural and material destruction: a severe storm had destroyed houses and churches, and wreaked havoc across the countryside. While many may have seen these as portents of the death of the ascetic king, others, with hindsight, may have seen them as warnings of the grim state of affairs to come. In 1064, Harold – one of Godwine's three sons and a renowned military leader – had undertaken a sea journey, the purposes of which still remain unclear. Norman chroniclers maintain that Harold was travelling to Normandy under Edward's instructions to confirm William's succession to the English throne, but this is not indisputable. Harold did indeed land on the French coast and meet with William, but the exact nature of what passed between them is lost to posterity. The possibly retrospective propaganda (ibid.: 80) of the Norman chroniclers has Harold pledging his loyalty to William and swearing to uphold his claim. It is equally possible, however, that Harold had his own royal ambitions. On his return to

England, he took Northumbria from his brother Tostig, installing a more trustworthy ally. It is possible that with such acts Harold had begun to draw together the alliances that would facilitate his election by the *witan*. And sure enough, when Edward died, Harold was offered the throne, and ‘the funeral of one king on the Feast of Epiphany 1066 was followed, later that same day, by the coronation of another, Harold II’ (Schama, 2000: 89).

The troubles of Harold’s short reign began almost immediately. Tostig was now an enemy, and across the Channel William was ‘enraged’ (William of Jumièges; quoted in Schama, 2000: 91) by Harold’s ‘usurpation’ of the English throne. Both managed to attract significant support – Tostig had joined forces with Harald Hadrada (known as ‘the thunderbolt from the north’ and once a contender for the English throne), and William had not only put together an army that included contingents from Brittany and other areas in northern France but had also secured papal backing for an invasion. Harold therefore fought two major battles in 1066. While waiting near London for William to land, the king received word that Tostig’s army had invaded and sacked towns in northern England. Harold marched his troops in their direction, reaching York in five short days. The English defeated this latest Viking attack, and almost immediately turned south to meet William’s offensive. The Battle of Hastings was a resounding defeat for the weary English army, who lost not only king (Harold is said to have been killed by an arrow in the eye), but country.

On Christmas Day 1066, the duke formerly known as *the Bastard* became *the Conqueror*, and was crowned King of England at Westminster. Acceptance, however, was not immediately forthcoming. In the early years of his reign, William faced significant opposition to which he retaliated forcefully, burning and plundering portions of the country, stationing armed troops across the countryside and executing members of the old Anglo-Saxon nobility involved in plots of treason. He also rewarded his supporters and retainers, Norman and otherwise, with the properties, estates and offices of the English nobility (many of whom had been killed at Hastings). Thus, for many of the surviving English who were near enough geographically and socially to the consequences of the Conquest, life changed dramatically:

the entire governing class of Anglo-Saxon England, some 4000 or 5000 thegns, had been made to vanish and authority, wealth, men and beasts had been given to foreigners. You could survive and still be English. You could even speak the language. But politically, you were now a member of the underclass, the inferior race . . . you lived in England, but it was no longer your country.

(*ibid.*: 67–8)

The depletion and displacement of the English in the higher social stations of church and state continued apace, and did not subsequently abate under the respective kingships of William’s sons. By 1072, only one of the 12 earldoms in England was actually held by an Englishman, and not for long: he was executed four years later (Baugh and Cable, 2002: 112). The two Archbishoprics of Canterbury and York were granted to Normans, and the English monasterial abbots were similarly replaced. Baugh and Cable (*ibid.*: 113) note that in 1075,

13 of the 21 abbots were English, but by 1087, only three remained. New monasteries, filled only with Norman monks, were also established under William's patronage.

The presence of Normans and other French migrants was also felt elsewhere. It is likely that the new Norman aristocracy staffed their households with their own retainers and guards, and soldiers from the Continent, as mentioned above, were garrisoned around the country. Merchants and craftsmen also moved their businesses to England. It is impossible to quantify exactly how many of these newcomers, in all walks of life, settled in England under William and his sons, but what is certain is that they never outnumbered the general English population. However, because the Normans largely became members of the governing classes, their 'influence was out of all proportion to their number' (ibid.: 114).

And what of their linguistic influence? At the moment, this is an extremely difficult question to answer: scant reliable evidence exists for the everyday linguistic situation after the Conquest, and we therefore have very little idea of who spoke what language, with whom and for what period of time. In addition, although we know that by the end of the fourteenth century, English had become a native tongue for descendants of the (largely) Norman invaders, we do not know exactly when that process of acquisition began. There are, however, a few clues in the textual and historical records which, along with our increasing contemporary knowledge of contact situations, can lead us through some educated guesswork about the changing linguistic situation after 1066.

Many of the new Norman nobility in England were also landholders in Normandy, and retained strong ties to their native land. It seems safe to assume then that in the early years following the Conquest, the language of communication among this group (who continued to execute their duties in Normandy) was their native variety of French. William's linguistic usage would have also facilitated this continued use: it is said that he tried to learn English but never became fluent in it, apart from – in fulfilment of that stereotype of the essence of Anglo-Saxon – swearing.

The ruling Anglo-Norman¹ classes inevitably transferred their everyday tongue to their official offices, and Anglo-French (that is, the French spoken in England after the Conquest) soon became established alongside the traditional Latin as the language of public state business and of the court. It also became the language of the literature that received royal patronage (see Section 4.3). Thus, English was ousted from public and official roles, and the cultivation of one of its varieties as a literary standard – a process which had begun with West Saxon under Alfred – was halted. English would not make a comeback for about two hundred years.

This is not to say that English was in danger of disappearing while Norman French was so publicly dominant. Nor should we assume that the ruling classes deliberately clamped down on its usage – an occurrence sometimes associated with colonizing activities. The Normans appear to have simply let the English speak the English way, and the language remained the native tongue of the majority of the population. Writing in English also carried on (the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example, was continued at monasteries such as Peterborough until 1154) but until about 1250, without the patronage of the court. Thus, in the

early post-Conquest years, Norman French became the language of rule not because of a need to implement a linguistic symbol of authority, but simply because it was the native tongue of the people at the top. English simply did not belong to them.

As intimated earlier, the question of exactly when it *did* start becoming used by the upper echelons is ultimately unanswerable. Dahood (1994: 40) points out that before the thirteenth century, evidence for such usage is sparse and mainly documents English use among the ecclesiastical community (we shall return to this below). Consequently, 'early evidence for people outside the church is anecdotal . . . notoriously difficult to interpret' (ibid.: 40), and needs to be treated with caution. For instance, a particular narrative often cited as evidence of English use among the Anglo-Norman upper classes comes from William of Canterbury's Latin *Life of St. Thomas Becket* (circa 1173). In Baugh and Cable's (2002: 121) paraphrase of this story, a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman noblewoman Helewise de Morville warns her husband of a supposed impending attack by a young Englishman, Lithulf, with the English words 'Huge de Moreville, ware, ware, ware, Lithulf heth his swerd adrage!' As Dahood (1994: 41) states:

in the prevailing view the anecdote is accepted as evidence that at least one member of the Anglo-Norman barony born in the first half of the twelfth century understood English or that in one Anglo-Norman baronial household English was familiarly spoken.

No absolute evidence exists, however, for this incident and some scholars have instead suggested that the story is fictional (see Burnley (1992: 425), Dahood (1994: 40–56), for instance). Dahood (ibid.) points for instance to William's vagueness about his source (the story is prefaced only by *ut fertur* 'as is said'), the lack of concrete dates for the event and of evidence for Lithulf's execution (the story states that the latter was boiled to death for supposed insurgence against his superior), as well as parallels with the biblical story of Potiphar's wife and narrations of martyrdom (involving death by boiling) in the hagiographic corpus. We should also note that even if the story is true, the actual linguistic evidence that it presents for English use in the upper classes is extremely minimal. Thus, as either possible fiction or scant fact, the story cannot be taken as definitive proof of language use in the early twelfth century. However, as Dahood (ibid.: 54) points out, it is still of historical and linguistic interest in that 'in 1173 William of Canterbury thought his audience would accept that an Anglo-Norman baroness of the preceding generation and perhaps her husband spoke English'. As such, it may be read as an indication, but not proof, that use of English by the Anglo-Norman nobility was underway by the mid–late twelfth century.

As stated earlier, the only Anglo-Norman sector for which there is some plausible evidence for the early use of English is the ecclesiastic. William's decision to fill the upper church ranks with his own supporters introduced a third language to a body that already made use of Latin and English. Records indicate that certain members of the church in the twelfth century, such as Gilbert Foliot (Bishop of London), Hugh of Nonant (Bishop of Coventry and Norman), Giraldus Cambrensis (Bishop-elect of St David's) and Abbot Sansom (of the

abbey at Bury St Edmunds) used all three languages fluently. However, such linguistic dexterity was not widespread – it is unlikely that those at the lower end of the church hierarchy such as local English parish priests, for example, generally had reason to learn French. Documentation also indicates that not all Anglo-Normans affiliated to the church could use English, and that those who did very likely acquired the language for specific ‘ecclesiastical duties or scholarly interests’. As such, they were ‘in their knowledge of English . . . untypical of the cultured classes’ (Dahood, 1994: 40).

As for the linguistic situation in other social strata, we can only move into the realm of conjecture. It seems inevitable that many of those migrants who found themselves, either by choice or design, living in conjunction with the English-speaking majority (such as knights stationed at outposts away from the Norman court, merchants and craftsmen) would have assimilated to this wider community. Stewards and bailiffs on manors may well have started out with (Norman) French ancestry, but their role as go-between for upper-class owners and lower-class workers may well have resulted in their acquisition of English. And finally, the mass of the peasantry, largely native English in origin, would appear to have remained monolingual in their native English varieties, having neither means nor motivation to learn any type of French.

We should also mention here the scribal class which emerged after the Conquest and who were involved in the copying and drafting of (usually official) records. Very little is known about who they actually were: Rothwell (1998: 6) points out, for example, that they may have been native French speakers (from Normandy or elsewhere) who had settled in England, or native English speakers who had learnt French as a foreign language. What does seem to be certain, however, is that they were trilingual in English, French and Latin, moving ‘freely from one language to another according to the nature of their work and the company in which they found themselves’ (*ibid.*: 11).²

Thus, by the beginning of the thirteenth century, England was a much more multilingual country than we currently imagine, but it is important to note that multilingualism was not widespread; while there was ‘a considerable number who were genuinely bilingual’, there were also ‘some who spoke only French and many more who spoke only English . . . as well as many who had some understanding of both languages while speaking only one’ (Baugh and Cable, 2002: 126). As England moved into the thirteenth century, the tide turned increasingly in favour of English, and proficiency in French waned. Indeed, English, as we will see, became intimately associated with notions of distinctive national identity – a process in which French could have no role.

With hindsight, it seems that these notions of ‘Englishness’ began to coalesce under King John (1199–1216), whose reign saw the creation of the Magna Carta (1215) and the severing of political ties between England and Normandy (1214).³ The historical record indicates that the Magna Carta, which ultimately sought to limit the potentially despotic power of the monarchy, evolved in reaction to a series of ill-judged political decisions on the part of the king. The essence of the charter was built on the idea of an English ‘state’, ‘of which the king was a part . . . but not the whole’ (Schama, 2000: 162). And that state was one of

English people, for some of whom loyalties lay to the land in which they had been born, not the Normandy that their ancestors had come from. When France had taken Normandy in 1214, nobles holding land there as well as in England had had to choose their allegiances. A significant proportion had given up their Norman holdings (and by extension, one of the reasons for maintaining fluency in French). In some cases, their decisions may well have been because their English estates were larger, but we cannot discount the possibility that many now considered themselves English, and were more concerned with internal English affairs. John's misdemeanours, then, ultimately began to give shape to an English polity that saw itself as distinct from its Continental ancestry. Psychologically, this sounded one of the death knells for the use of French in England.

The separation of French and English political interests continued under John's son Henry III, who cultivated the loyalty of his French relations (on his mother's side and through his marriage to Eleanor of Provence) with generous grants of high-ranking appointments, land and titles in England. As a result, London was 'full to overflowing . . . of Poitevins, Romans and Provençals' (Matthew Paris, quoted in Baugh and Cable, 2002: 132). The inevitable backlash to this immigration (issuing primarily from the displaced nobility in England) was enshrined in the Provisions of Oxford (1258), in which a number of Henry's French entourage were stripped of their English holdings and expelled. Schama (2000: 177) asserts that the circumstances out of which these documents emerged struck another nail in the coffin for absolutist monarchy and signalled the beginnings of modern government. Significantly, when they were produced in final form the following year, 'the documents were written, for the first time, not only in Latin and French but in Middle English, the native tongue' (ibid.: 177).

Yet, resentment of French immigrants at the top of English society did not preclude admiration of French courtly culture. By the late thirteenth century, the Parisian court dictated trends and fashions in practically every sphere, including language. Knowledge of what scholars today call Central French (but see Rothwell (1998), Section 4.3.5) therefore became *de rigueur* for members of the higher classes and those who aspired to join them. Anglo-French, which remained one of the languages of official documentation in England until the end of the fourteenth century, was increasingly seen as inferior to the French of the Parisian court, and its decline as a spoken language was no doubt aided by this denigration. Those whose families may once have spoken Norman and later, Anglo-French, natively or as a second tongue, now sought tuition in the fashionable variety, as the multitude of language instruction guides which appear in this period testify. Interestingly, the style and format of these guides indicate strongly that the majority of learners were in fact native speakers of English.

As the thirteenth century progressed into the fourteenth, English gradually became re-established through a concatenation of socio-political circumstances partly catalyzed by natural disasters. The relative prosperity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had trebled the country's population to about four million by 1300. Many areas had, as a result, become overpopulated, opening the way to the potentially disastrous effects of famine and disease, especially for the peasantry.

Sure enough, a succession of bad harvests led to a severe famine in 1315–1316, followed by cattle murrain and sheep disease. The decimation caused by the famine was increased when Edward III took England into the Hundred Years War (1337–1453). This not only cost lives on the battlefield but also left fields unploughed, harvests ungathered and animals untended. When bubonic plague hit in 1348 and 1350, it swept easily through the weakened population, leaving thousands dead across Europe by the end of its gruesome run. In England, the impact of this was keenly felt: in the villages around Bury St Edmunds, for example, 60 per cent of the population succumbed to the Black Death in 1348 (Schama, 2000: 235–6). Overall, after the second wave of pestilence, approximately 30 per cent of the overall population of England, particularly the poor, had perished.

An outcome that no-one could have predicted then began to unfold. The decrease in population (particularly among the peasantry) began to shift the economic balance of the country, largely through undermining the old feudal system. Serfs and peasants used to be relied on for manual work and harvesting but after 1350, with labour thin on the ground, the survivors of the old peasantry could set financial and contractual terms that suited them, demanding either pay (or higher rates of pay) and moving to wherever economic and social prospects looked promising.

The plague returned in 1361 and after that, in 20–25-year cycles, all of which were punctuated by increasing taxation demands to finance the war against France. In 1381, frustration at such levies resulted in the Peasants Revolt – a rebellion in south Essex by villagers against the tax commissioners sent to collect payments. Interestingly, it was a revolt ‘conspicuous for the absence of peasants’ (Schama, 2000: 246). Many of the leaders were members of the village yeomanry (who served as jurors, reeves and constables) who had actually profited from the tragic events of past years since they had been able to take over abandoned lands and estates and increase their personal wealth. They were, however, not prepared to hand over so easily what fortunes they had managed to build up. But they must have seemed exemplary to the villagers on whose behalf they stood, and were a model of what it was now possible to be: ‘all [the] sections of the rural community thought of themselves as up and coming’ (ibid.: 247).

Throughout the fourteenth century, then, the sense of ‘Englishness’ continued to evolve and change. When Edward III (the first king to speak English natively since the Conquest) consulted Parliament about the war with France in 1337, the proceedings were conducted not in the language of the potential enemy, but in English. The tolls of the famines, wars, runs of plague and poor leadership were harsh, but they ultimately succeeded in re-structuring English society in ways which favoured those once at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. This stratum came to have money and for the first time, a public voice. And that voice was English.

In 1362, the Chancellor opened Parliament in English, and in the same year the Statutes of Pleading, which stated that all lawsuits were to be conducted in this language, were passed. When Richard II was deposed in 1399, the articles of accusation were read to Parliament in Latin and English, and his successor

Henry IV made his first regal speech in the latter language. The peasants who had flocked to the towns and cities in search of work turned these places into thriving urban centres, in which their native English flourished. With money also came the potential for education, and many of the offspring of this now up and coming middle class were exposed to tuition. The fact that instruction now had to be given to youngsters whose first language was English, plus the fact that many tutors who had been able to teach French and Latin had been killed by the plague, meant that English became increasingly important in schools.

This is not to say that usage of French (and to a more limited extent, Latin) disappeared quietly overnight. Acquisition of the ‘sophisticated’ French of Paris was still desirable for those who wanted a courtly or educated veneer, and Anglo-French continued to be used as one of the main languages of legal and ecclesiastical business until 1362. Literature appeared in both French and English, and public records sometimes appeared in Latin, Anglo-French and English. But the language of the English nation ultimately prevailed, and by the fifteenth century, towns and guilds were producing their official records in English only. By 1489, Parliament had stopped using (Anglo-)French completely, and wills and other public texts were produced, with few exceptions, only in English. All in all, by the end of the fifteenth century, English was the conqueror.

4.3 Middle English Literature

The Middle English period was one of significant literary achievement, seeing the production of both translations and original works in both English and French. In the two hundred or so years that French was ascendant, the literature enjoyed and patronized by the court was inevitably composed in this medium. Initially, a significant body of this material was imported from the Continent, but literary works in French soon began to be produced in England itself, including poetry commissioned by various patrons and religious treatises. Despite the early lack of royal patronage, writing in various dialects of English continued much as it had done during the Anglo-Saxon period and indeed, increased in quantity as English became re-established in the public sphere. Thus, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* continued until 1154; compositions such as *Ormulum* (c. 1200), *Ancrene Riwe* (c. 1215), *The Owl and the Nightingale* (early 1200s), as well as Romance poems such as *King Horn* (c. 1225), *Havelock the Dane* (c. 1280–1300) and *Floris and Blanchflur* (c. 1250) were produced in the thirteenth century, as were works such as biblical paraphrases, homilies and saints’ lives. The late twelfth century also saw translations of French texts. Lazamon’s well-known *Brut* (c. early thirteenth century), based on the Norman poet Wace’s translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Latin History of the Kings of Britain*, belongs to this tradition.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw a wealth of literary production, of which we will cite only a sample, including *Athelstan* (c. 1355–80), *Sir Orfeo* (early 1300s), *The Earl of Toulouse* (c. 1400) and *King Edward and the Shepherd* (late 1300s). Chaucer’s *Boethius*, *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, as well as *The Canterbury Tales* all emerged in the fourteenth century, as did Langland’s

Piers Plowman, anonymous poems such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, *Cleanness (or Purity)* and *Patience*, and the medieval mystery plays of the Wakefield and York cycles which also began to be performed during this period. John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1390–1393) dates from the fourteenth century, as does Julian of Norwich's (1342–c. 1416) *A Revelation of Love* and Margery Kempe's (c. 1373–1438) *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The inflammatory religious prose and biblical translations of Wycliffe and his followers also emerged in this period.

The fifteenth century saw the work of Scottish poets such as William Dunbar (1460–1522), who wrote *The Tretis of the Tua Marrit Women and the Wedo*, Arthurian romances such as *The Avowing of King Arthur* (c. 1425) and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (late 1400s). Finally, the ME period has also left a significant textual record in terms of legal and medical documents, sermons, macaronic poems (or poems where more than one language is used for composition, such as *On the Times* and *On the King's Breaking of the Magna Charta*), lyrics (such as *Alisoun*, *Fowles in the Frith* and *My Lief is Foren in Londe*) and personal and public correspondence (such as the Paston letters).

Let us now turn to a consideration of the linguistic features of ME usage that such texts have shed light on.

4.4 The Language of Middle English

Even with the proviso that it does not accurately record contemporary speech, the ME corpus has proved an invaluable and impressive database for historians of the language. The fact that it spans most of the period – a period in which, crucially, no literary standard existed – and is dialectally diverse means that it lends itself easily to both diachronic and synchronic study, allowing observations about both language change through time and variation at particular points in time. We will note instances of variation and change where relevant in the following sections (see also Fennell, 2001: 110–13; Burnley, 1992: 63–196).

Before beginning our description of ME, we should take note of its main dialects. Five are generally recognized: Northern, Midland (East and West), South-Eastern and South-Western. Northern (derived from the OE Northumbrian dialect) stretched from the middle of Yorkshire to Scotland and so subsumed Scots, the English variety of the lowlands. Scots came to be used as a literary standard in Scotland from the late fourteenth century onwards, and has been especially noted as the medium for the work of the fifteenth-century 'Chaucerian poets' of the Scottish court. We will not pursue the history of Scots here, but the interested reader is referred to Barber (1993), Görlach (1991) and Wales (2002).

As to the other dialects, South-Eastern derived from OE Kentish and South-Western from OE West Saxon. Mercian was the OE antecedent of Midland (stretching from London to Gloucestershire), which is traditionally separated into East Midland and West Midland. Fennell (2001: 109) also distinguishes a sixth dialect, East Anglian, stating that texts from that particular area show marked differences from its neighbouring East Midlands variety.

4.4.1 Features of ME Spelling

In the ME period, quite a few changes were made to spelling conventions, one of the results of which, for the modern reader, is to make English seem much more familiar. Some of these resulted from the influence of Norman scribes, and others were re-introductions of orthographic practice which had become obsolete during the OE period. The most significant re-introductions were the substitution of *th* (used before 900) for OE *þ* and *ð*, and of *w* in place of the runic wynn *ƿ* for [w]. Early OE scribes had used *uu* for this sound, but the Norman scribes introduced the joined-up, double-u we use today.

In early ME spelling, the three allophonic values of /g/ – [g], [ɣ] and [j] – were represented by both *g* and *yogh*, ȝ (a retention of Anglo-Saxon ȝ). In general, the graph *g* represented [g] (as in ME *gome* ‘man’), and ȝ [ɣ] and [j] (as in ME *cnigt* and *ȝelde(n)*). By late ME, [ɣ] was represented by *gh* and [j] by *y*, hence later ME spelling of the latter two examples as *knight* ‘knight’ and *yelde(n)* ‘yield’, ‘give’.

Anglo-Norman scribes also introduced the use of the graph *v* for [v], which in OE had been represented by *f*, as in OE *drifan* (‘to drive’) and *seofan* (‘seven’). They also followed the continental practice of using *v* and *u* for both consonant and vowel sounds. As a general rule, *v* was used word-initially and *u* elsewhere, yielding ME spellings such as *euer* (‘ever’), *euil* (‘evil’) and *vndep* (‘undeepest’ > ‘shallow’).

The allophones of OE *c*, namely [tʃ] and [k] (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1) were orthographically disambiguated in ME. The spelling *ch* was introduced to represent the palatal sound, which occurred next to front vowels (thus, OE *cild* [tʃ] > ME *child*), and *c* was retained for [k], which primarily occurred with back vowels and consonants, hence ME spellings such as *care* (‘unhappiness’), *cofre* (‘coffin’), *cunde* (‘nature’) and *clerc* (‘priest’, ‘cleric’). In the few instances where *c* did represent [k] before front vowels, the symbol was changed to *k*, hence modern *kin* (OE *cyn/cynne*) and *king* (OE *cýning*).

Other significant changes include that of OE *hw* to *wh* (as in OE *hwæt* > *what*), as well as the replacement of OE *sc*, which represented [ʃ] (as in *fisc* ‘fish’), by the more transparent *sh* (sometimes *ss* or *sch*), OE *cw* [kw] (as in *cwēn* ‘queen’) by French *qu* (inherited from Latin), and OE *cg* [dʒ] (as in *ecg* ‘edge’) by *gg* and later *dg(e)*.

In terms of vowels, the main spelling changes to note were that scribes frequently used double vowels to indicate vowel length, as in *rood* (‘cross’); and that final unstressed *e* after a consonant also indicated that the main vowel in the word was long, as in *fode* (‘food’). The French spelling *ou* came to be used for long *ū* [u:], as in OE *hūs* > ME *hous*. It is worth remembering at this point that even though such vowel spellings look a great deal more familiar, the sounds they represented did not yet have their modern values. Thus, *hous* was still pronounced [hu:s] at this point, and *fode* as [fɔ:d]. The shifts that would take these vowels to their modern values would not occur until much later (see Chapter 5).

4.4.2 Features of ME Pronunciation

The ME corpus indicates that the consonantal system remained relatively stable during the period, experiencing a few significant changes from OE. The vowel

system, however, underwent many more changes, some of which (as we will see later) would have far-reaching consequences for the inflectional structures of English.

We begin with the consonants.

4.4.2.1 ME consonants

As discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.1), OE speakers appear to have made use of word-initial consonant clusters including *h*, as in *hl*, *hn* and *hr*. ME spelling indicates that the pronunciation of this initial *h* disappeared, as can be seen in Example 4.1:

Example 4.1 Disappearance of initial *h*

OE		ME	
hlēor [hl]	>	lere [l]	‘complexion’
hnappian [hn]	>	nappe [n]	‘to sleep’
hrapor [hr]	>	rather [r]	‘sooner’

The loss of [h] in *wh* clusters (from OE *hw*), apart from when it preceded a back vowel, initially began in the southern dialect areas and later spread to other ME regions. Thus *h*-less pronunciations in words such as *what* and *where* (OE *hwær*) are commonplace today, but *who* (OE *hwā*/ME *ho*) retains [h] and not [w].

Other OE word-initial consonant clusters which underwent pronunciation change in ME include *sw* and *tw*. Where these clusters came to precede a back vowel (as a result of sound changes), the pronunciation of *w* was lost. Thus OE *swā* ([sw]) and *twā* ([tw]) became ME *so* ([s]) and *two* ([t]) respectively.

As noted in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.1), [f]/[v], [s]/[z] and [θ]/[ð] were voiceless/voiced allophones, the first in each pair occurring word-initially and word-finally, and the second, word-medially. In ME, this distribution became blurred for two main reasons. First, English borrowed French and Latin loans with initial voiced [v] and [z], such as (in their modern forms) *veal*, *virtue*; *zeal*, *zodiac*. In analogy with this pattern, initial *f*, *s*, *ð* and *þ* in native English words become voiced – a change that first began in the southern ME dialects. Our modern pronunciations of *this* and *they*, for example, are the result of this voicing, as are words such as *vixen*, which derives from OE *fyxe* (‘female fox’).

Second, many of the OE inflectional endings were reduced and lost during the ME period (discussed in more detail below). Thus, in words such as *giefan* (‘to give’), the final *–an* inflection was reduced to the unstressed vowel schwa and then ultimately lost in pronunciation, although it survives orthographically in final *–e*. This meant that the OE voiced medial *f* in words like *giefan* become word-final in ME (as in *gif* [v]). The same principle applied to the pronunciation of words such as *lose* [z] (OE *losian*) and *bathe* [ð] (OE *bapian*). The loss of complementary distribution in these allophonic pairs (that is, their occurrence in mutually exclusive environments in the word) paved the way for their eventual adoption as phonemes.

Finally, the *–n* [n] of OE inflections such as verb infinitive *–an* (as in *giefan*), *n*-stem plurals (as in *huntan*), and adjectives in a weak declension (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2) began to be gradually lost in pronunciation (and spelling) in the

ME period – a development which affected the language's grammatical and syntactic systems. In possessive pronouns such as *min(e)* and *thin(e)*, final *-n* was also lost before a consonant, as in OE *min fæder* > ME *my fæder* (but *myn eye*).

4.4.2.2 ME vowels

In syllables that carried stress, the OE short vowels spelt *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u* ([a], [ɛ], [ɪ], [ɔ] and [ʊ]; see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1) remained unchanged in ME, although some underwent lengthening in certain environments (see below). Short [æ] (æ), on the other hand, was lowered to [ɑ], as reflected in the ME spelling *glad* (from OE *glæd*). This change initially occurred only in some ME dialects – texts from the South-west Midland and Kentish dialect areas spell the same word *gled*. Pyles and Algeo (1982: 149) postulate that this indicates little variation from the OE [æ] sound in these areas.

Short [y] (y) was also unrounded in ME to [ɪ], as indicated by spellings such as *brittened* from OE *brytnian* 'destroyed'. This change occurred first in the Northern and East Midland dialect areas.

In terms of the OE long vowels in stressed syllables, three important changes took place. First, south of the Humber, words with OE long [ɑ:] (ā) rounded to [ɔ:] in pronunciation, as indicated in the ME spellings *bon* and *ston* (OE *bān* 'bone' and *stān* 'stone', respectively). In the North, the OE value was retained for a longer period, and evolved into [e:] in modern Scots, as indicated by spellings such as *hame* ('home') and *stane* ('stone').

Second, in the Northern and East Midland dialect areas, long [y:] (ȳ) was unrounded (like its short counterpart) to [i:]. In the later years of the fourteenth century, this change eventually spread to the West Midland and South-west areas. In Kent and the South-east regions [y:] became [e:]. Thus, where texts from the Northern and East Midland areas use spellings such as *hiden*, those from Kent and the South-east render the same word as *heden* ('to hide', from OE *hȳdan*).

Third, the pronunciation of OE long *æ* and *ēa* fell together as [ɛ:], and that of OE *ē* and *ēo* as [e:], in the ME period. ME orthographic conventions, however, did not typically disambiguate the two, as can be seen in ME spellings such as *seen* [ɛ:] 'to see' (< OE *sēon*) and *leef* [ɛ:] 'leaf' (< OE *lēaf*). However, *ea/ei* for [ɛ:] and *ee/ie* [e:] did later come to be used in the Early Modern Period. Eventually [ɛ:] and [e:] also fell together, as can be heard in modern pronunciations of *sea* (from OE *sǣ*) and *see* (OE *sēon*) (from Barber, 1993: 154).

ME vowels also appear to have also undergone quantitative changes in pronunciation, meaning that they were either lengthened or shortened depending on environment. For instance, OE short vowels which occurred before certain consonant clusters (namely, *mb*, *ld*, *rd*, *nd* and *rð*) were lengthened. Thus, short [ɪ] in words such as *milde*, *climben*, and *binden* became [i:]. If the cluster was followed by a third consonant, however, lengthening did not occur. OE *cilde* ([ɪ]) for example, therefore came to be pronounced with long [i:] in ME, but remained short in *children*.

Another important case of lengthening occurred with short [a], [ɛ] and [ɔ] (*a*, *e*, *o*) in open syllables (that is, syllables which end in a vowel). Hence OE

words such as *bacan* [ɑ] ('to bake') became pronounced with long [ɑ:] in ME, OE *stelan* [ɛ] ('to steal') with long [ɛ:] and OE *prote* [ɔ] with long [ɔ:] (examples from Pyles and Algeo, 1982: 151).

Conversely, long vowels which in OE preceded double consonants, as in *hȳdde*, shortened in ME pronunciation, as did long vowels before consonant clusters such as *pt* (*kepte*, from OE *cēpte*) and *nt* (*twentig*, from OE *twēntig*). If a long vowel occurred in the first (typically stressed) syllable of a trisyllabic word in OE, then it was also shortened in ME, as occurred with OE *hǣligdæg* ([æ:]) 'holiday'.

The diphthongs of OE (*eo*, *ēo*, *ea*, *ēa*) essentially became monophthongized in the ME period. Short *eo* and *ea* were replaced in spelling by *a* and *e* respectively, yielding forms such as *yaf* (OE *geaf* 'gave') and *herte* (OE *heorte* 'heart'). The long diphthongs *ēo* and *ēa* became, as seen earlier, monophthongal [e:] and [ɛ:], respectively. New diphthongs did however emerge, partly through the incorporation of French loanwords, but also primarily through combinations of vowels and glides such as [j] and [w]. Thus, borrowings such as *joie* and *cloister* yielded [ɔɪ] and others such as *boilen* and *poisen* [ʊɪ]. This has of course changed – modern English users typically pronounce *boil* and *poison* with [ɔɪ].

Other new ME diphthongs – [aʊ], [ɔʊ], [ɛʊ], [ɪʊ] – developed from different sources. The vocalization of *w* after vowels, for instance, produced all four, as occurred in the ME pronunciations of words such as *clawe* [aʊ] 'claw', *flowe* [ɔʊ] 'flow', *lewed* [ɛʊ] 'unlearned' and *nīwe* 'new' [ɪʊ]. However, [aʊ] and [ɔʊ] also emerged from combinations of back vowels and the voiced velar fricative [ɣ] which vocalized and became represented in spelling by *w*. Thus, OE *lagu* and *boga* became ME *lawe* [aʊ] 'law' and *bowe* [ɔʊ] 'bow', respectively. Finally, the combination of front vowels and [j] produced [aɪ] and [eɪ] – a development which, according to Pyles and Algeo (1982: 149), had begun in the OE period. Thus, OE *maegn* 'might', 'power' became ME *mayn* [aɪ] 'great', 'strong' and OE *plegian*, ME *pleie*, *play* [eɪ] 'to play'. The two qualities fell together in the late ME period.

Last but by no means least, vowels in unstressed syllables underwent leveling in ME (a process which may well have begun in the Anglo-Saxon period). A significant consequence of this was that the myriad (typically unstressed) inflectional endings we looked at in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.2) eventually fell together in pronunciation as schwa – and as *-e* in spelling – losing their function as morphological signals for number, case (apart from the genitive) and gender distinctions. Thus, nominative singular *oxa* 'ox' became *oxe*, plural accusative *hundas*, *hundes* 'dogs', and singular masculine *gōda* (adjective in weak declension), *gode* 'good'. Plural marking, however, remained salient but the different endings available in OE were quantitatively reduced. We consider these points in more detail in Section 4.4.3.

4.4.3 Features of ME Grammar

We should note that although inflectional reduction is usually cited as one of the most salient and distinctive characteristics of ME, it is very likely to have begun in earlier stages of the language – witness, for example, the syncretism of certain

inflectional paradigms in Old English (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2). The extensive ME database does, however, offer a much clearer view than the OE corpus of such change in progress. Consider for instance the extracts in Example 4.2 (a)–(c), which are taken from different periods of Middle English writing (Burnley, 1992).

Example 4.2 ME texts

- a. And se kyng of France brohte þone eorles sunu Willelm of Normandi, and iæf hine þone eorldom, and þet landfolc him wið toc.

And the King of France brought the earl's son, William of Normandy, and gave the earldom to him, and the people of that land accepted.

(from the *Peterborough Chronicle*, First Continuation 1127)

- b. þa þe king Stephne to Englalande com, þa macod he his gadering æt Oxeneford; and þar he nam þe biscop Roger of Serebyri, and Alexander biscop of Lincol, and te canceler Roger, his neues, and dide ælle in prisun til hi iafen up here castles.

When King Stephen came to England, he held a parliament at Oxford, and there he took Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, and Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, the Chancellor Roger, his nephews, and imprisoned them until they surrendered their castles.

(from the *Peterborough Chronicle*, Final Continuation 1154)

- c. For the difficulte of the processe, it briefly can not be expowned what the pagans, otherwise called the paynymys, supposed of their goddis, and what they were that first gaawe enformacion to haue theyr goddes in reuerence and worshipp, and what oppynyon they hadde of their immortalite.

(from John Skelton's translation of the *Bibliotheca Historica* of Diodorus Seculus; fifteenth century)

Text 4.2(a) makes use of inflected forms of the definite article in phrases such as *se kyng* (masculine nominative singular), *þone eorles sunu* and *þone eorldom* (both masculine accusative singular). *Eorles* in *eorles sunu* carries the common OE genitive singular inflection. The writer also maintains a distinction between third person singular accusative masculine *hine* and dative masculine *him* (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2). By the time of text 4.2(b), the inflected forms of the definite article have been replaced by *þe* (sometimes spelt *te*, as in *te canceler*). The plural nouns in this text (*neues* and *castles*) carry *-(e)s* inflection. The third person plural pronouns, however, still retain their OE forms, namely *hi* 'they' and *here* 'their'. By the time of Skelton's translation, all plurals end in *-(e)i/s* (*pagans*, *paynymys*, *goddes/goddis*) and the third person plural pronouns are those inherited from Old Norse, namely *they*, *theyr/their*.

We will consider such changes (and others) in the following discussion (see also Burrow and Turville-Petre (1996: Chapters 4 and 5) for a detailed description).

4.4.3.1 ME nouns

By the end of the twelfth century, levelling and inflectional reduction to schwa (and *-e*) had largely erased the case, number and gender inflectional paradigms

of OE nouns. In the case of inflectional endings with a final nasal, such as the plural dative *-um*, the nasal appears to have been lost before the vowel change to schwa.

Nouns did, however, continue to mark plurals and genitives, using inflections inherited from OE declensional patterns and extending them to paradigms to which they did not historically belong. Thus, ME plural forms (apart from historically ‘irregular’ forms such as *i*-mutated and zero-marked plurals, as in *feet* and *deer*) were generally formed with either *-es* (from OE *-as*, *a*-stem declension) or *-en* (from OE *-an*, *n*-stem declension) (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2). The use of these inflections tended to conform to dialectal divisions in ME: southern dialects appear to have favoured the *-en* plural, while the *-es* plural was used elsewhere, particularly in the northern dialects. Thus, ME texts record alternate plurals such as *deoflen* and *deuils*, *kine* and *cows*, *eyen* and *eyes*. As we know, *-en* eventually ceased to be employed as a productive plural marker.

The genitive singular *-es* inflection (from OE *-es*, *a*-stem declension) was also extended to general use with ME nouns, but was indistinguishable in writing and speech from the plural *-es* inflection where the latter was used: *eorles*, for example, could mean ‘earls’ or ‘earl’s’. However, context would have helped disambiguate such instances, so we know that *eorles*, for example, is a genitive in the extract from the *Peterborough Chronicle* quoted in Example 4.2 (a) because it occurs in conjunction with *sunu* (*eorles sunu*). This formula of *possessor noun-genitive inflection* + *possessed noun* has of course continued into modern English (with the introduction of the apostrophe in spelling).

Some nouns in ME, however, did not carry genitive marking, such as those which denoted family relationships and ended in *<-er>*, as in *fader bone* ‘father’s murderer’, nouns which had been feminine in OE (*his lady grace*), and proper names, as in *Adam kynde*, *God hert* (Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 24).

The ME corpus also indicates increasing use of other types of possessive marking. *Of*-phrases, as in *pe termes of Judé*, began to appear, as well as a *his* genitive, which would become more popular in the Early Modern Period. In the latter construction, *his* functioned as the possessive marker, as in *Seint Gregore hys bokes Dialoges* ‘St. Gregory’s books *The Dialogues*’ (Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 40). We will return to examples of this process in Chapter 5.

4.4.3.2 ME pronouns

ME pronouns, like their OE antecedents, continued to retain distinctions of person, case, number and gender. The major points of difference lay in the loss of the OE dual forms, and the falling together of OE accusative and dative third person singular forms (such as *hine* and *him*) – a process that had already occurred for OE first and second person singular and plural forms (see Chapter 3, Table 3.7).

The ME corpus displays a wide range of dialectal variation in the actual pronoun forms. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate some of these (examples from Pyles and Algeo, 1982: 157).

The southern dialects maintained the OE third person accusative-dative distinction longest, but eventually followed the rest of the dialect areas in opting for one object pronoun form. In addition, as Table 4.2 shows, the Scandinavian

Table 4.1 ME pronouns – first and second persons

	First person		Second person	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
nominative	ic, I, ik	we	thou	ye
object	me	us	thee	you
genitive	mi, min(e)	our(e), oures	thi, thin(e)	your(e), yours

th-third person plural forms which are commonplace today were merely variants in the ME period, surfacing first in texts from the Northern and Midland dialect areas – regions which had once encompassed the ninth-century Danelaw settlements. Eventually, as we know, these forms would dominate and replace the Anglo-Saxon *h*- pronouns.

4.4.3.3 ME definite article

With the inflectional losses in the noun system, the OE forms of the definite article, which varied according to case, gender and number, were all eventually replaced by *the* in early ME (see Example 4.2 (b)). By the end of the period, the modern system whereby the definite article remains invariant, regardless of the inflectional marking on the noun (here plural or possessive) as well as of its function in the sentence, had been well and truly established.

4.4.3.4 ME adjectives

The OE inflectional paradigms marking case, number and gender in adjectives – which comprised either a vowel, or vowel plus *-n* (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2) – also underwent reduction in the ME period, again through the loss of inflectional *-n* and vowel levelling. The southern dialects, however, did retain for a time a distinction between weak and strong forms, as well as of number in certain types of adjective. When a monosyllabic adjective, or one which ended in a consonant (such as *old*, which fulfils both criteria) pre-modified a noun with a demonstrative (an OE weak declension) *-e* was added word-finally. This also applied when the adjective modified a plural noun. Hence, in texts from southern

Table 4.2 ME pronouns – third person

	Singular			Plural
	masculine	feminine	neuter	
nominative	he	she, scæ, ho, hye, scho, he	hit, it	hi, they, thai
object	hine, him	hir(e), her(e), hi	hit, it	hem, heom, the(i)m, thaim
genitive	his	hir(e), her(e), hires	his	her(e), heres, their(e), theirs

dialect areas, it is not unusual to find structures such as *god man* ('good man'), but *the gode man* (weak declension) and *gode men* (plural).

ME adjectives also retained OE comparative and superlative inflections, but in slightly different forms. The OE comparative *–ra*, being an unstressed syllable, also underwent reduction of the vowel to schwa. In spelling, the ending therefore became *–re*, and later, the *–er* still used in modern English. The superlative inflections *–ost* and *–est* also underwent vowel reduction, ending up in spelling as *–est*. Some texts indicate that if the root vowel of the adjective was long, it often became shortened when these inflections were added, and the root consonant doubled in spelling. Hence the superlative form of *greet* (great) is represented orthographically as *grettest* (Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 30).

4.4.3.5 ME verbs

The OE distinction between weak and strong verb classes survived into Middle English dialects, as did a great many of the inflectional characteristics we considered in Chapter 3. The ME corpus does, however, also show that inflectional changes were under way. For instance, the infinitive *–an* suffix (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2) underwent the ubiquitous loss of final *–n* and vowel levelling to schwa. In southern ME dialects, the inflection was retained in writing for a time as *–en*, but as *–e* in the North, hence southern *heren* ('to hear') and northern *here*. ME texts indicate that as the inflection lost its morphological usefulness, prepositions such as *to* and *for* increasingly took over its function.

The OE shared present indicative and present subjunctive inflections for weak and strong verbs (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2) survived into ME, but were also subject to levelling. Table 4.3 compares the inflectional endings typically found in southern and northern dialects, using the weak verb *to heren/here* ('to hear'). The ME southern dialectal data is taken from the *Ancrene Wisse* (early thirteenth

Table 4.3 ME present indicative and subjunctive inflections

Present indicative			
	OE endings	ME endings	
		<i>Ancrene Wisse</i> Infinitive <i>heren</i>	<i>Gawain</i> Infinitive <i>here</i>
I	-e	here	here
thou	-est	herest	heres
he, she, it	-eð	hereð	heres
we, ye, they	-að	hereð	here(n), heres
Subjunctive			
	OE endings	ME endings (northern and southern)	
I, thou, he, she, it	-e	here	
we, ye, they	-en	heren	

century, South-West Midlands), and the northern is taken from the *Gawain* manuscript (late fourteenth century, North-West Midlands) (cited in Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 32–3).

The *-en* ending of indicative and subjunctive plural forms gradually disappeared during the ME period and was replaced in pronunciation and spelling by schwa and *-e* respectively. Overall (and as we know) modern English retains none of these inflections apart from the third person singular present *-s* (*he, she, it hears*): a descendant of the northern *-es*.

Weak and strong verb preterite conjugations continued into ME, and strong verbs generally retained their OE ablaut patterns, as can be seen in Table 4.4 (data from Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 34–5).

The *-e* and *-en* suffixes continued to undergo levelling in the ME period and eventually disappeared, as did the weak *-dest* suffix of the second person singular (*-des, -dez* or *-de* in Northern and Northern Midland dialects). The movement towards the use of one preterite form for all persons and numbers of the subject (as in modern English *I/we, you* (singular and plural), *he, she, it/they heard/drove*) appears to have begun in the ME period first in the northern dialect areas. The *Gawain* manuscript seemingly records this change in progress, sometimes not only using one preterite form regardless of subject (in this case, *drof*), but also the older OE singular and plural preterite forms indiscriminately, indicating that the distinction was increasingly becoming less salient. Thus *ran* (preterite singular) and *runnen* (preterite plural) are both used with plural subjects. The southern dialects, however, appear to have been quite conservative in terms of this feature (as indeed they were in so many others, as we have seen), and maintained the distinction between singular and plural preterite forms for much longer (see Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 36).

In terms of the past participle, the completive prefix *ge-* of both weak and strong verbs was reduced in pronunciation, as can be seen in its spellings as *y-* or *i-* in ME *ibolwe* (OE *gebolgen* ‘puffed up’) and *ibeot* (OE *gebēot* ‘boast’). ME texts also show dialectal variation in strong verb past participle forms. The *-en* ending was maintained in the northern dialects, but not in the South and Midlands (as

Table 4.4 ME preterite conjugations in weak and strong verbs

	Weak verb <i>heren/here</i> ‘to hear’		Strong verb <i>drifan</i> ‘to drive’	
	OE endings	ME endings (<i>Ancrene</i> <i>Wisse</i>)	OE forms	ME forms (<i>Ancrene</i> <i>Wisse</i>)
I	-de	herde ‘heard’	drāf	draf ‘drove’
thou	-dest	herdest	drīfe	drive
he, she, it	-de	herde	drāf	draf
we, ye, they	-don	herden	drifon	driven

in *ynome* ‘taken’, *ydrawe* ‘drawn’ and *ycore* ‘chosen’). Some of these variants survived while others did not; hence modern English has inherited *–en* forms such as *broken* and *eaten*, but also *–en*-less forms such as *drunk* and *sung*. In some cases, both variants still exist: *got* and *gotten* are used by modern speakers, although the former is now considered typical of British usage, and the latter of American.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, many strong verbs in ME developed weak past and past participle forms through analogy with the more widespread paradigm. In quite a few cases, the weak forms dominated, and have been inherited by modern English. Thus *crēap/crupon/gecrupen* gave way to *crept* and *healp/hulpon/geholpen* to *helped*. Finally, one more feature of note for the ME verb concerns dialectal variation in the present participle inflection. Our modern English ending *–ing* (as in *dancing* and *talking*) is inherited from the form used in the southern ME dialects. Others, such as *–and(e)* (Northern), *–inde* (South-West Midlands) and *–ende* (East), were all used throughout the ME period, but eventually disappeared from the language.

4.4.4 Features of ME syntax

The preference for VO word-order evident in the OE corpus (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3) continued into the ME period, as did the comparatively less frequent use of OV structures. If the object of a sentence was a pronoun, word order was typically OV, as in Example 4.3(a). Subject-verb inversion (in structures with basic VO order) occurred in imperatives and after adverbs of place, time and manner, as illustrated in Example 4.3(b)–(c):

Example 4.3 ME word order

Object pronoun

- (a) Yef thou me zayst
 S O V
 if you say to me . . .

Imperatives

- (b) Clothe ye him, brynge ye a fat calf . . .
 V S O / V S O
 (you) clothe him and (you) bring a fatted calf

After adverbs of place, time, manner

- (c) here lieþ counforte
 V S
 here lies comfort

Another ME structural feature we should note concerns the placement of modifying adjectives in noun phrases. Adjectives tended to pre-modify nouns (as they do in modern English), but in ME verse they sometimes followed them, as in *sceld deore* ‘beloved shield’. In cases where more than one adjective was used in a noun phrase, one would typically function as a pre-modifier, and the other (or others) as post-modifiers, as in *he milde man was and softe and god* (‘he was a gentle man and soft and good’).

The ME corpus also shows an increasing use of *to be* as the auxiliary verb in passive constructions, as well as the use of *by* to introduce the agent of the action (as in modern *my car **was** destroyed **by** my little brother*). Alternative structures did, however, exist: *worthe* ('to be', 'to come to be'), as in *blessid þou worth* ('may you be blessed'), was used, for example, until the fourteenth century (Burrow and Turville-Petre, 1996: 52). In early ME, an indefinite pronoun *men* (in unstressed form *me*) was often used to express the passive, as in *me henged up bi the fet and smoked heom mid ful smoke* ('they were hung up by the feet and smoked with foul smoke'; *The Peterborough Chronicle*, Final Continuation 1154).

The verb *do* also began to develop a variety of functions in ME. It retained its OE function as a 'substitute verb' in sentences such as modern *Mark loves watching TV and I **do** too*. In some ME dialects, *do* also meant 'make' or 'have' – a usage still retained in phrases such as *let's do lunch*. The past tense form *did* was sometimes used to signal past tense (as in *did carye* 'carried'), a construction which was used productively in Early Modern English (see Chapter 5). Its other uses, such as as an auxiliary in negative statements and questions, which have become part of modern English usage (as in *they don't eat liver* and *do you hate cats too?*), had begun to appear, but would not become a consistent part of usage until approximately the seventeenth century.

Finally, as the importance of prepositions grew in ME (as the synthetic nature of English diminished), new creations joined this word class. Many emerged through semantic change, as in the case of *among*, whose OE antecedent *gemong* meant 'in a crowd', or through compounding (as in *in + to*) and borrowing, as in the case of *till* (borrowed from Old Norse) and *except*, from Latin (Fennell, 2001: 102).

4.4.5 Features of ME vocabulary

Whereas the lexical stock of Old English had been largely Germanic, that of Middle English was somewhat more Romantic in nature. English borrowed significantly from French in this period (a typical estimate is about 10,000 loans), and it is traditionally held that these loanwords entered the language in two main phases divided approximately by 1250. In the first early stage of borrowing, a relatively small number of loanwords entered English primarily from Norman French, their nature reflecting the social positions held by the newcomers from the Continent. For example, some of the earliest loans include words such as (in their modern form), *government*, *administer*, *castle*, *prison*, *service*, *attorney*, *court*, *jury* and *felon*. In the church, the new *clergy* also gained new *abbots*, and administered the *sacrament*. The court gained *princes*, *dukes*, *counts* and *countesses*, *barons*, *marquesses* and *dukes*, although the Anglo-Saxon titles *king*, *queen*, *earl*, *lord* and *lady* remained. A *soldier* in the newly re-formed *army* took his orders from *captains*, *corporals*, *lieutenants* and *sergeants*. *Beef*, *pork*, *mutton* and *veal* were now served to table, sometimes as meals which have now become synonymous with British cooking: a *roast* or a *fry* up.

After 1250, it is thought that the majority of loanwords derived from the fashionable French of the Parisian court (or Central French), in vogue at most

thirteenth-century European courts as a symbol of ‘chivalrous society in its most polished form’ (Baugh and Cable, 2002: 134), including that presided over in England by Henry II and Eleanor of Provence (see Section 4.2). Thus, borrowings continued in the domains mentioned above but also entered fashion (*fashion, dress, cape, coat, petticoat, lace, boot, mitten, blue, scarlet, jewel, brooch, diamond*), domestic settings (*arras, curtain, towel, chandelier, blanket, basin*), social life (*recreation, leisure, dance, minstrel, juggler, melody, music, conversation*), hunting and riding (*rein, stallion, trot, stable, falcon, merlin, forest, tournament*), art (*sculpture, beauty, colour, image, tone*), architecture (*cathedral, palace, chamber, ceiling, turret, porch, pillar*), literature (*poet, prose, romance, story, chronicle, title, chapter*) and medicine (*physician, surgeon, malady, plague, pestilence, anatomy, balm, sulphur, ointment*).

Various sources (such as Baugh and Cable, 2002; Fennell, 2001; Pyles and Algeo, 1982) state that ME speakers sometimes borrowed the same word twice, once in each phase. This is based on the assumption that regular sound correspondences obtained between the two varieties of Norman and Central French, which resulted in the same word having somewhat different phonetic forms. Thus, where Norman French had [w], Central French had [g]; and Norman French [k] and [ʃ] corresponded to Central French [ʒ] and [s] respectively. English therefore borrowed *warranty* and *warden* from Norman French and later, their Central French counterparts *guarantee* and *guardian*; *catch* and *launch* from the Normans and *chase* and *lance* from the Parisian court. Whereas the difference between these forms in the two varieties of French was purely phonetic, the primary distinction in English is semantic: to *catch*, for example, is not the same as to *chase*, even if both activities are related.

One scholar who challenges the idea of two phases of borrowing from two distinct sources is William Rothwell (1998). He argues that this position, replicated unquestioningly in many discussions of French loanwords in the ME period, is based on material compiled in the early twentieth century, when relevant data and analysis were sparse. Recent progress, however, in the form of publications of the *Middle English Dictionary*, the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* and other such sources, has rendered much of the earlier suppositions and theories about borrowing obsolete, particularly the notion of a second wave of borrowing from Central French.

The main thrust of Rothwell’s argument is that Anglo-French was much more influential a source of borrowing than Central French. He points out that there is no evidence that the diverse French retinue favoured by Henry and Eleanor actually spoke a variety which ‘corresponded to what modern philologists are pleased to call *Central French*’ (Rothwell, 1998: 6). Anglo-French, on the other hand, was very much a reality, and was well established in usage. Rothwell therefore believes that English was much more likely to borrow from this more familiar source on its doorstep.

Rothwell’s article provides a range of supporting examples, of which we will consider two. He postulates that if certain loans in English were in fact from Central French, then we should see a significantly close correspondence in form and meaning between the two. Thus, our modern English *customs* (as in *customs*

and *excise*), allegedly borrowed in the ME period from Central French, should have an identical or similar counterpart in the latter's modern descendant, standard French. This is, however, not the case – today, travellers to France must pass through the *douane*. Thirteenth-century Anglo-French texts record a verb *custumer* 'to pay customs duty', very likely derived from the noun *custume* 'customs duty'. On the Continent, however, the French paid *droits de douane* from about 1372, *douane* itself being a borrowing from Arabic, and a reflection of the productive trade that France carried on in the Mediterranean at that time.

Another example is that of English *dungeon*, ostensibly a borrowing in ME from Parisian *donjon*. However, English *dungeon* is semantically closer to the Anglo-French *donjun*. A person in a Parisian *donjon* would be enclosed in the centre of a castle but in an English *dungeon*, in an underground cell. Rothwell (ibid.: 13) argues that the Continental meaning of *donjon* has remained stable for about eight hundred years, but that that of Anglo-French shifted during the thirteenth century. Thus, Anglo-French texts from the twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries show that the word was being used in the sense still preserved on the Continent, as can be seen in Example 4.4 (a)–(b). However, thirteenth-century texts also indicate a growing use of the word without the sense of elevation (but still with the earlier senses of strength and security (Example 4.4 (c)). By the first half of the fourteenth century, the sense of being underground was explicit in the use of *donjun*, strongly suggesting it as the source of the English word (Example 4.4 (d)).

Example 4.4 Use of *donjun*

- (a) La reine . . . a tant devalle le dungun
'the queen . . . thereupon comes down from the keep' (*The Life of St Catherine*, twelfth century)
- (b) les treis bailles du chastel Ki . . . defendent le dongon
'the three baileys of the castle which . . . protect the keep [the strongest part of the castle]' (*Le Chateau d'Amour*, thirteenth century)
- (c) Il est bricum, E clostre dust estre, ou en dungun
'he is a fool; he ought to be in a cloister or a dungeon' (*Le Manuel de Pechez*, thirteenth century)
- (d) Ly roi descendist en un bas dongoun
'the king went down into a deep dungeon' (*Chronicle of Peter of Langtoft*, fourteenth century)

Finally, Rothwell (1998) makes an interesting and challenging point about words such as *catch* and *chase* which, as we have seen, have been accepted as having entered English from two different sources in two different periods. He states that:

the distinction between 'Norman' spellings of words taken into Middle English during the early period, and the 'Central French' spellings attached to words adopted later, is far from being as clear-cut as it is made out to be in reference books.

The repercussions of this are significant, since the differences in spelling, which are taken to indicate differences in pronunciation, have been key in maintaining the argument for two different waves of borrowing. Take, for example, the alleged equivalence of Norman French [k] (spelt c) and Central French [tʃ] (*ch*) before *a*

and *o* (see above). At its most straightforward, this means that *ch* before these two vowel graphs should not appear in ‘Norman texts’. This is, however, not the case. Anglo-French texts written in the early years after the Conquest (the first appear about 50 years after 1066), and which should therefore show a heavy Norman influence, contain spellings which have been classified as indicative of Central French provenance. Thus the early twelfth-century *Leis Wilheme* (‘The Laws of William’), the earliest body of law written in French in England, and ‘as “Norman” and as “official” a text as it is possible to find’ (Rothwell, 1998: 8), uses ‘Central French spellings’, such as *chalenjeurs*, *chambre* and *cheval*. Similarly, the *Estoire des Engleis* (1135–40) uses *chalengier* and *champaigne* alongside *cacier* and *campiun*; and *Li Quatre Livre des Reis* (1170) has *chaldes* and *champions*, but also *cancelant* and *kachevels* (ibid.: 8). As Rothwell (ibid.) points out, texts written in Anglo-French were no more standardized in spelling than those written in Middle English, and we may have been naïve in never considering this as a factor. Overall, if Rothwell’s analyses are correct (and we have as yet no reason to believe they are not), then the assumptions of two discrete phases of borrowing during the ME period may have to be re-thought. Closer interfaces with the work of Anglo-French scholars may very well hold the key to linguists formulating a more accurate understanding of borrowing during this period.

4.5 Contact and Change: Middle English Creolization?

As we have seen, the Norman Conquest created a context for contact between speakers of English and French. While language contact was certainly not new in the history of English, or even in the history of England, the relationship between French and English has retained a particular fascination for socio-historical linguists, particularly since the period is also one in which English as a whole appears to change considerably from its Old English predecessor. An assumed correlation between language contact and language change in the ME period is not unreasonable: modern sociolinguistic studies, for example, can often demonstrate a link between the two (see Thomason and Kaufman, 1988, for numerous case studies). Given this context, the linguist piecing together a diachronic narrative of English can very easily see the phase in which French and English co-existed functioning like a transformation device between the Anglo-Saxon and ME periods: late OE goes in one end around 1066, and an English much more recognizable to the modern eye emerges from the other around the thirteenth century.

The question that this brings modern researchers to concerns the nature of the contact situation between French and English. Was it, for example, the kind of context which allows for each language, or one language, to impact structurally on the other, or was it one in which the languages co-existed discretely but with the opportunity for limited lexical borrowing in certain domains? Many scholars have opted for the latter scenario as the more plausible (a perspective presented by well-known histories of English such as those of Baugh and Cable (2002) Barber (1993) and Fennell (2001)), but others such as Bailey and Maroldt (1977) have famously (or notoriously) argued instead for the former kind of contact

situation, postulating that French and English had in fact participated in processes of creolization. Their position has been widely discredited, but it and proposed counter-arguments are frequently mentioned in discussions of the ME period as an important example of language contact analysis (albeit a failed one). The debate therefore deserves some attention here, and the following discussion – which begins by outlining Bailey and Maroldt’s position – will incorporate current perspectives from creole studies that have inevitably not been included in seminal treatments such as that of Thomason and Kaufman (1988) and subsequent summaries such as Fennell (2001).

Bailey and Maroldt (1977: 21) define *creolization* as ‘the gradient mixture of two or more languages’ which occurs in situations of contact. A *creole* emerges when ‘the result of mixing . . . is substantial enough to result in a new system, a system that is separate from its antecedent parent systems’ (ibid.). The authors argue that the linguistic make-up of ME is testimony to this mixing: (1) it combines features of English and French; (2) it uses English elements in French functions; and (3) it shows the influence of French in certain grammatical developments.

In relation to (1), Bailey and Maroldt (1977: 52) argue, for example, that the majority of derivational affixes used in ME came from French loanwords, although a ‘not inconsiderable volume’ was also inherited from Anglo-Saxon. In addition, ME vocabulary contained a ‘very considerable’ number of loans from French, which are significant both quantitatively and qualitatively. In terms of quantity they state, for example, that in 1460, 40 per cent of ME vocabulary was derived from French; and in terms of quality, that while French loans in ME largely fell into certain cultural domains (see Section 4.4.5), they also included ‘basic’ borrowings, such as *uncle*, *aunt*, *nephew*, *niece*, *danger*, *doubt*, *trouble* and *cause* (ibid.: 34–5). However, ME also made use of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, including a high degree of ‘basic’ lexis, including ‘most functional elements’ (such as prepositions, demonstratives, conjunctions) (ibid.: 52).

In terms of (2), Bailey and Maroldt state, for instance, that many verb constructions in Middle English use English words but are modelled on French constructions. Hence English perfect aspect, as in *she **has broken** the window*, is based on the French pattern *avoir* (‘to have’) + *main verb past participle*. *Go* + *infinitive main verb* (as in *I’m **going to eat** crisps all night*) is allegedly also modelled on French *aller* + *infinitive*. Similarly, the authors argue that the use of *of*-genitives in ME was based on French *de*-possessives (as in *la voiture de Guillaume* ‘William’s car’), just as the use of *to* before an indirect object in a sentence derived from the use of French *à* (as in *donnes le livre à Robert* ‘give the book to Robert’).

Finally, in terms of (3), Bailey and Maroldt argue that the Middle English loss of OE case and gender inflections in nouns, determiners and adjectives (the authors do not mention number) was largely determined by the ‘clash’ with the entirely different inflectional systems in French, which rendered the use of the OE morphological signals ‘so utterly complex . . . [they] had to be given up’. As further support for statement (3), the authors also propose that French SVO word order came to predominate in ME, and that constructions such as *it is me*

and *it is him*, where object pronouns are used instead of the subject pronouns *I* and *he*, are ‘clearly French’ (ibid.: 46).

Overall, Bailey and Maroldt (ibid.: 21, 22) claim that ‘at least forty percent of each component [of ME] – lexicon, semantax, phonetology [*sic*], and morphology – is mixed’, making it ‘a mixed language, or creole’. The salient question for the authors is therefore whether ‘Old French was creolized with Anglo-Saxon . . . whether Anglo-Saxon was creolized with Old French, or whether the mixture was of so thorough-going a nature that it makes little sense even to pose the question at all’ (ibid.: 22–3). This is not addressed in specific detail but in all fairness, the authors state that the analyses they present are provisional.

What they do argue about the assumed process of creolization is that it took place in stages, the first of which involved Old Norse and Old English contact in the late Anglo-Saxon period. This ‘Norse creolization’ resulted in ‘linguistic instability’ that in turn paved the way for later creolization involving French (ibid.: 26). Given that contact between Norse and English speakers took place in Danelaw areas, removed from London and the southern regions which would later be the focus of contact between French and English, this purported influence of Norse creolization seems odd. However, the authors postulate that substantial immigration to London from the Danelaw in the fourteenth century had a significant linguistic impact on the English varieties of the capital.

Norse creolization was followed by two stages of French and English creolization: a pre-1200 ‘major creolization’, and a minor one involving substantial borrowing from Central French in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Bailey and Maroldt (ibid.: 30) therefore argue that the ‘English’ being spoken by the end of the Middle English period was ‘certainly not a variety of Anglo-Saxon’.

Bailey and Maroldt’s position, however, is undermined both by inconsistencies and ambiguities, as well as by the fact that their definitions of creoles and creolization have little or no currency in creole studies itself. In addition, their analysis of ME as a ‘mixed, analytic language’ is problematic. The following discussion outlines some of the main problems which fall into each or all of these categories.

One immediate problem concerns the question of Norse creolization in the Danelaw which ‘prepared’ (southern) English for further creolization with French. The ‘major creolization phase’ of French and English, however, allegedly occurred between 1066 and 1200, thus pre-dating the supposedly influential fourteenth-century immigration of Danelaw populations into London. Even if we assume that the migrations were supposed to have influenced the ‘minor creolization’ phase, the causative link between tenth-century and thirteenth–fourteenth-century creolizations is tenuous. For the authors, this link is ‘linguistic instability’, which ‘prepares the ground’ for further creolization (ibid.: 26). There are two problematic issues here: a seemingly indiscriminate assumption that creolization is the generic outcome of contact situations where languages impact on each other (see their open-ended definition of creolization cited earlier), and an assumed link between linguistic instability and creolization. Sociolinguistic studies have repeatedly demonstrated that all situations of language contact, and the motivations of relevant speakers, are not identical; and it would seem naïve to therefore assume that they all

have the same linguistic result. Depending on the circumstances, contact can create a wide range of linguistic outcomes: among others, it can cause the emergence of systems such as a pidgin or creole, or contribute to the obsolescence of one language, or to heavy lexical and structural borrowing in another. To say that contact generally boils down to the same effect – creolization – is, as Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 307) point out, to virtually render the term meaningless and also to reduce all situations of contact to a common denominator: an act not only demeaning to the communities involved but also descriptively unhelpful.

Furthermore, the term ‘linguistic instability’ is ambiguous and unquantifiable: does it imply that the usage of one speaker varied considerably and erratically from another’s, or that norms of linguistic and social usage are violated? Even if ‘linguistic instability’ could be delimited, its existence in the sociolinguistic context Bailey and Maroldt describe is still problematic: by the time ‘linguistically unstable’ Norse creoles arrived in London, they would have been established as ‘stable’ first languages in speech communities for generations. If Bailey and Maroldt are in fact suggesting that creoles are inherently ‘unstable’ systems that are erratic and highly variable, then they are wrong. As I will explain below, creoles are native languages which are distinguished not by any ‘linguistic peculiarities’ but primarily by the socio-historical context of their origins. They are therefore no more ‘linguistically unstable’ than any other living language.

Bailey and Maroldt’s assumption of English–Norse creolization is also, in itself, tenuous. The extensive analysis carried out by Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 274–304) on English varieties spoken in areas of the Danelaw shows that Norse impacted primarily on English lexis, simply adding ‘a few subtleties of meaning and a large number of new ways of saying old things, often by replacing an English item of similar but not identical sound’ (ibid.: 302; 303; see also Chapter 3, Section 3.4.4). These authors also maintain that there was no social and linguistic motivation for Norse creolization to occur, an issue to which we will return.

Another problematic dimension of Bailey and Maroldt’s thesis lies in the fact that their analysis of ME features influenced by or derived from French typically contains very little or no supporting evidence. For example, the authors state that ‘it is clear that the Middle English tense-and-aspect system was a *tertium quid* which resembled French rather more than Anglo-Saxon’ (Bailey and Maroldt, 1977: 42), or that constructions such as *it is me* are ‘clearly French and always have been’ (ibid.: 46). It is not clear, however, why these correlations are presented as indisputable. The authors do not make available any evidence that constructions such as *aller* + *infinitive*, or *avoir* + *main verb present participle*, for example, actually existed in the French varieties of post-Conquest England. Equally importantly, there is also no evidence that the equivalents of such constructions did not already exist in English. Indeed, Bailey and Maroldt (ibid.: 41) state that such constructions had existed ‘superficially’ as ‘optional variants’ in Old English. In the authors’ argument, these options ‘won out’ in ME because they received reinforcement from allegedly similar patterns in the French of the period. This, however, contradicts characteristic (2) of Middle English (see above): if such constructions already existed in English, then they cannot have been, as the authors argue, ‘Anglo-Saxon elements in French functions’ (ibid.: 51).

A related issue here is the authors' presentation of certain (allegedly French-influenced) features as unmarked in the 'new' and different system of Middle English. Thus, growing use of *thou* and *you* as informal/formal pronouns of address, for example, and the use of the *of*-genitive are discussed as basic, unmarked features of Middle English, without explicit acknowledgement of their development and function within the English system. Thus, although *thou* and *you* began to be used to indicate social distance between speakers (a usage that continued and developed during the Early Modern period; see Chapter 5), they also still retained their previous Anglo-Saxon functions of denoting number in the second person pronoun (a usage that also continued beyond the ME period). While the *of*-genitive was used during ME, it was (as we saw in Section 4.4.3) one of many options, not an absolute, for possessive marking.

Bailey and Maroldt (*ibid.*: 21) also claim that ME exhibits 'analyticity', a 'special identifying trait' of creole morphology. 'Analyticity', the authors state, is a 'universal loss of inflections' (*ibid.*: 51); a definition that does not quite match the accepted understanding of analytic systems (see Chapter 1, Section 1.5). Even if the authors' definition of analytic structure were assumed, this description of ME would still be problematic. As we saw in Section 4.4.3, ME underwent not wholesale inflectional *loss* but inflectional *reduction*. Thus, nouns continued to carry case (genitive) and number (plural) marking; pronouns retained the synthetic nature of their OE antecedents, signalling case, gender, number and person; verbs continued to carry present indicative, subjunctive, preterite and participle inflections; and adjectives retained for a time weak and strong declensional forms as well as comparative and superlative suffixes. ME is, therefore, in the authors' definition of 'analyticity', definitely not an analytic system. Furthermore, the southern and London varieties of ME, speakers of which would have had the most contact with French, appear to have been more inflectionally conservative than other varieties: another problematic issue for the blanket assumption that contact equals inflectional loss. Incidentally, we might also reasonably ask how ME can exhibit 'loss' of anything, considering the authors' argument that it is a new and independent system.

A final point we can make here about the 'analyticity' of ME is that here too, the authors do not consider the developments in the inflectional systems of ME in the general context of English language history. The authors assume, as stated earlier, that the meeting of different English and French inflectional paradigms caused such confusion that speakers abandoned them. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, inflectional reduction was well under way in OE by the ninth century and indeed, is very likely to have begun much earlier. There is therefore no reason to assume that the processes of levelling and reduction in ME were anything but a continuation of tendencies already clearly observable in preceding stages. Overall, as Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 308; 312) state, 'the reasonable assumption is that gradual change [from OE to ME] was going on' from generation to generation. Contact and conflict, therefore, are not the unequivocal catalysts of change in this context that Bailey and Maroldt present them as being.

A further area of ambiguity and inconsistency in Bailey and Maroldt's thesis lies in their conceptualization of certain qualities. For example, they state, quite

rightly, that some assessments of characteristics in linguistic systems are necessarily variable and have to be judged not comparatively, but independently. Thus, a claim of ‘substantial language mixing’, for instance, has to be ‘judged on the basis of the result’ before it can come close to being quantifiable (1977: 21). However, the authors themselves do not consistently adhere to this principle. They cite, for example, as evidence of ‘substantial language mixing’ the fact that ME contains a ‘very considerable’ vocabulary borrowed from French (ibid.: 52). While there is indeed a high proportion of French loans in ME, these words were ultimately a component of a much bigger, predominantly Germanic lexicon. In addition, while statistical counts may give the impression that the proportion of French words was extremely high in actual usage (Bailey and Maroldt (1977: 32), for example, cite an occurrence of 50 per cent in Chaucer), we should bear in mind the contexts in which texts (our only source of data) were written:

It was probably not only an author’s audience, but also his own background endowments and tastes that determined the number of adoptions from [French] that he used. This is one of the reasons why the first record of a French word in ME should not necessarily be assumed (as is commonly done) to imply that it was, or even soon became, generally current in the ‘language’. In fact, so long as we are dealing with any one ME work, the influence of French vocabulary on the ‘language’ is an abstraction: such a notion applies only to words which are found, on analysis of many works, to recur in several of them.

(G.V. Smithers, 1968: lii; quoted in Thomason and Kaufman, 1988: 314)

‘Substantial’ therefore may not be so big after all.

From a creolist perspective, Bailey and Maroldt’s definitions of *creoles* and *creolization* – in particular the claims of language mixing and the generation of a specific structural language type – are perhaps the most problematic aspect of their thesis. While critical discussions such as that of Thomason and Kaufman (1988) and Fennell (2001) explicitly take issue with the authors’ assumptions about language contact situations, they do not really question the idea of creolization as a process which creates particular structural characteristics. These concepts, once current in linguistic thought (and in all fairness, at the time Bailey and Maroldt were writing), have long since been revised.⁴ However, these more recent perspectives do not always find their way into critical summaries of the ME creolization hypothesis which tend to still use the same discourses as Bailey and Maroldt, mainly by focusing on the lack of ‘creole features’ in ME or in arguing that ME does not have the ‘morphological simplicity’ of creoles. It is therefore perhaps time to update the critical stance by looking at current perspectives in creole studies.

Numerous theories of creole genesis and creolization have been formulated since these languages first began to be recorded and studied in the seventeenth century.⁵ However, as Chaudenson (2001: 43) points out, these have tended to fall somewhere between two polar extremes, both of which posit creolization as a purely linguistic process:

- (a) Creoles allegedly developed from the interference of two or several linguistic systems.
- (b) Creoles are putatively the results of the restructuring of European languages.

In both types of explanation, creolization has been typically associated with contexts of language contact created by colonizing practices (particularly slavery and indentureship), which often brought ethnically diverse groups, speaking mutually unintelligible languages, together in exogenous settings. In such situations, a *superstratal* group, typically comprising members of the colonizing nation, were socio-politically dominant over a numerically larger but culturally and linguistically diverse *substratal* group who were socio-politically powerless (such as slaves and indentured labourers). The hostility and distance between the two main groups, plus the imposition and maintenance of an unequal dynamic of power, were therefore not conducive to, for example, assimilation of one set of speakers to another, or to multi-lingualism but instead to creolization.

Bailey and Maroldt's assumption of language mixing – an accepted theory of creolization in the late nineteenth–mid-twentieth centuries – falls into Chaudenson's category (a). Proponents of this theory typically maintained that creoles combined a grammatical system derived from the substrata, and a lexicon from the superstratal language: Sylvain (1936: 178; quoted in Chaudenson, 2001: 44), for example, stated that Haitian French Creole combined 'African syntax' and French vocabulary. Popular theories of creolization from the 1950s to the 1970s, such as that of *monogenesis* and *relexification*,⁶ were based on this idea of language mixing, and were therefore very likely to have influenced Bailey and Maroldt's own view of the process (although we must point out that it has always had its detractors). Such positions have now largely been discredited, mainly because there is scant evidence for them, and also because assumptions of generic entities such as 'African syntax' are untenable and in Chaudenson's words, 'outlandish'. Yet, putting aside its current marginalization in creole studies, Bailey and Maroldt's view of language mixing does not conform to that once accepted in the field. We might have expected them to posit (in accordance with stances such as Sylvain's) that 'mixed language' or creole ME comprised a substratal English grammatical system, and a superstratal French lexicon. Yet this is not their position. Although they repeatedly claim language mixture and the production of a new, creole system, the stance that their analysis instead seems to feed is change in English under the influence of French – a position which we have already seen as problematic in other ways.

A related issue here is the assumption that creoles are a specific structural type, namely languages with 'analyticity'. We have also seen that this analysis of ME is erroneous, but even if it were not, it would involve inaccurate assumptions about the structural nature of creoles. Chaudenson (2001: 48–9), quoting Whinnom (1965: 522), lists structural features thought to be common and peculiar to creoles formed in European-driven colonial contexts. Some of these are listed below.

Creoles show:

1. Elimination of inflections for number in nouns and for gender and case in pronouns.
2. A system of preverbal particles to express tense, mood and aspect (as in *mi bin go tell am* ('I would have told him'); Guyanese English creole data from Bickerton (1986: 24).

Bin expresses tense (here, past); *go* expresses mood (here, future and conditionals); *tel* – main active verb. For a fuller explanation, see Singh (2000: 57).

3. Identity of adverb and adjective (as in *come quick* (adverb); *a quick job* (adjective)).
4. Iteration for intensification of adverb-adjectives (as in *she pretty pretty* ‘she is very pretty’ (adjective)).
5. The use of an all-purpose preposition *na* (as in *you no see one man kill one tarra one na Cowra tarra day?* ‘didn’t you see that one man killed another in/at/near Cowra the other day?’).
6. Development of compound prepositions of the type *na* + noun + *de*, or some other genitive marker (as *foe* in Sranan).
7. The word for ‘thing’ as interrogative (*sani* in Sranan).
8. The word for ‘much’ derives from a model language word that means ‘too much’: *tro, tumsi, maisa*.
9. The overall simplicity of these languages as such.

(adapted from Chaudenson, 2001; creole data from Trinidad English creole)

While some of these structures do occur in creole languages, they are not peculiar to them, and they are certainly not common to all. For example, (1)–(4) and (8) occur in ‘lingua franca varieties of many languages’ and can also be found in regional varieties of French (Chaudenson, 2001: 49); and (1) and (3) occur in regional non-standard varieties of English in the United Kingdom. Structures (5) and (6) are not found in French creoles (*ibid.*), and while (5) appears to have been used in the nineteenth-century English creole in Trinidad, it has since dropped out of use (Singh, 1997). Feature (7) does not occur in current usage in French creoles, nor in English creoles in the Caribbean. Chaudenson (2001: 49) also points out that a feature such as (9) is so general in reference as to be inconclusive. In addition, ‘simplicity’ as a defining characteristic is particularly unhelpful and ambiguous. It remains largely undefined in linguistics, mainly because it has no fixed criteria which can delimit it objectively and, as such, has been used variously to describe (sometimes subjectively) very different processes and features. In terms of creole description, ‘simplicity’ is problematic because it has been used in the past, in its sense of ‘simple-mindedness’ and ‘lack of sophistication’, to denigrate these languages and their speakers.

It has also been used in reference to creoles as ‘young’ languages – a perspective which seems to underlie Bailey and Maroldt’s assumption of morphological simplicity. It has long been assumed that since known creoles have emerged relatively late in linguistic history, they have not had time to ‘evolve’ like older, established languages. They are therefore construed as ‘simpler’ (younger) languages which have not developed ‘complexities’ such as highly inflected systems. This, however, assumes that creoles are static – even if they began life as predominantly ‘inflection-less’ systems as in Bailey and Maroldt’s definition of ‘analyticity’ (and it is not a given that they do), they will, like other living languages, have undergone (and be undergoing) processes of change which potentially result in what might be termed more ‘complex’ features. Grammaticalization, for example, could produce derivational or

inflectional morphemes, as could the borrowing of loanwords (see Chapter 1).⁷ Indeed, creole speakers do make use of ‘complex’ inflectional structures: urban as well as formal varieties of Trinidad English creole, for example, make varying degrees of use of English preterite, plural and possessive inflections, as in *he went by Ravi* (‘he went to Ravi’s’), or *where meh books?* (‘where are my books?’), or *she used to be mom’s boss* (personal data collection, 2002). To ascribe a blanket description of ‘simplicity’ to creoles is therefore to ignore a dynamic, changing system.

Bailey and Maroldt’s (1977) assumption that creolization produces identifying structural traits, including ‘analyticity’ (or ‘simplicity’) – an assumption, it should be noted, which is shared by their critics – is presently considered untenable by influential creolists such as Mufwene, Chaudenson and DeGraff to name but a few. Indeed, with regard to this particular issue, Chaudenson (2001) and Mufwene (2001) both maintain that creolization is not so much a linguistic restructuring process as ‘a social phenomenon’ (Mufwene, 2001: 113); ‘a human and social tragedy characterized by unity of time, place and action’ (Chaudenson, 2001: 34). As Mufwene (2001: 138) summarizes:

The most adequate interpretation of *creolisation* – if such a process must be posited – appears to be the social marking of a particular colonial vernacular of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries from other colonial varieties because of the ethnic/racial affiliation of its primary speakers . . . Having been restricted historically to (sub) tropical European colonies of the past few centuries, creoles are far from being a general structural type of language although they form a special sociohistorically defined group of vernaculars.

We will return to creolization in Chapter 5. One final but important point about Bailey and Maroldt’s thesis concerns the social context for creolization. The authors, in accordance with established theories of creolization such as those cited earlier, assume the presence of superstratal (French) and substratal (English) groups in the Middle English period but with none of the social distance that would typify a context of creolization. Indeed, the authors themselves state that: ‘There is no cogent reason to assume that any socially relevant groups had a pro-Anglo-Saxon or anti-French attitude before the time when the dominant classes themselves turned to English as their mother language’ (Bailey and Maroldt, 1977: 30). If this were the case, then surely there is ‘no cogent reason’ to assume that a creole, a language seeded in social distance, ever emerged. Instead, as we have seen, it is perhaps more likely that bilingualism for sectors of the population was the likely outcome, with assimilation to the larger settled English-speaking population occurring within a few generations of English-born Norman descendants.

Overall, Bailey and Maroldt’s creolization hypothesis, in the amount of critical attention it has received, has contributed to productive debates on the varying nature of language contact and its outcomes. It also extended the concepts of *creoles* and *creolization* (flaws apart) outside of the situations with which they have been typically (and sometimes derogatorily) associated. By suggesting that creolization was a product of language contact and could therefore arise anywhere if the situation was right, they implied that creoles were not marginal or unusual systems – a derogatory perspective that retained currency for a long time in discourses on the subject. Thus, in principle, there were perhaps some beneficial

aspects to their thesis. However, as we have seen, the high degree of inconsistencies and inaccuracies put forward in their paper greatly undermined their position. To paraphrase the authors, ultimately, it perhaps made ‘little sense even to pose the question at all’ (Bailey and Maroldt, 1977: 23).

4.6 Study Questions

1. In Section 4.4.1 we saw that *c* typically represented [tʃ] before front vowels in ME. There are, however, cases in which its value is [s], as in ME *citee* ‘city’, *ceptre* ‘sceptre’, *cessyd* ‘ceased’, ‘ended’. What is the reason for such exceptions?

2. What are the origins of the modern demonstrative pronouns *this*, *that*, *these* and *those*? A good dictionary with etymological sources will be useful here.

3. The following passages (i) and (ii) are taken from two varieties of fourteenth-century ME.

- (i) Chaucer *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (fourteenth century; London (East Midlands dialect))

A povre widwe, somedeel stape in age
 Was whilom dwellynge in a narwe cotage
 Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale.
 This widwe, of which I telle yow my tale,
 Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf,
 In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf.
 For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
 By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
 She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
 Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
 Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
 Ful sooty was hire bour and eek her halle,
 In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
 Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.

- (ii) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (fourteenth century (Northern))

Wel gay watȝ þis gome	gered in grene
& þe here of his hed	of his hors swete
Fayre fannand fax	ymbefoldes his schulderes
A much berd as a busk	ouer his brest henges
þat wyth his hiȝlich here	þat of his hed reches
Wat euesed al vmbetorne	abof his elbowes,
þat half his armes þer-vnder	were halched in þe wyse
Of kynges capados	þat closes his swyre.
þe mane of þat mayn hors	much to hit lyke
Wel cressed & cemmed	wych knottes ful mony
Folden in wyth fildore	aboute þe fayre grene,
Ay a herle of þe here,	an oper of golde;
þe tayl & his toppyng	twynnen of a sute
& bounden boþe wyth a bande	of a bryȝt grene,
dubbed wyth ful dere stoneȝ,	as þe dok lasted;

Syþen þawen wyth a þwong,	a þwarle-knot alofte,
þer mony belleȝ ful bryȝt	of brende golde rungen
Such a fole upon folde,	ne freke þat hym rydes,
Watȝ neuer sene in þat sale	wyth syȝt er þat tyme
With yȝe.	

Using a good ME glossary (such as Davis (1979) for Chaucer and that included in Burrow and Turville-Petre (1996) for the *Gawain* extract), answer the following questions:

- What present participle inflections are used in each text?
- What present indicative inflections are used in text (ii)?
- How are plurals marked in each text?
- What is, or are, the source(s) of loanwords in both texts? Does one text contain more borrowings from one source than the other? If so, why might this be?

4. The following is an excerpt from a ME lyric *Alisoun*. Using Section 4.4, discuss the features that characterize the language at this period (make use of a glossary):

Bitweene Merch and Averil,
 When spray biginneth to springe,
 The litel fowl hath hire wil
 On hire leod to singe.
 Ich libbe in love-longinge
 For semlokest of alle thinge.
 Heo may me blisse bringe:
 Ich am in hire baundoun.
 An hendy hap ich habbe yhent,
 Ichoot from hevene it is me sent:
 From alle wommen my love is lent,
 And light on Alisoun.

5. The following short excerpts (i) and (ii) are taken from two translations of the Bible (St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 26, verses 69–71). With reference to Section 3.4 and Section 4.4, compare the two, noting the linguistic changes that have occurred:

(i) Old English (c. 1050)

(69) Petrus soðlice sæt ute on þam cafertune. þa com to hym an þeowen 7 cwæð. 7 þu wære myd þam galileiscan hælende. (70) 7 he wyðsoc beforan eallum 7 cwæð. nat ic hwæt þu segst. (71) þa he ut eode of þære dura. þa geseh hyne oðer þynen. 7 sæde þam ðe þar wæron. 7 þes wæs myd þam nazareniscan hælende.

Note: '7' = 'and'

(ii) Middle English (1375)

(69) And Petir sat with outen in the halle; and a damysel cam to hym, and seide, Thou were with Jhesu of Galilee. (70) And he denyede bifor alle men, and seide, Y woot not what thou seist. (71) And whanne he ȝede out at the ȝate, another damysel say hym, and seide to hem that weren there, And this was with Jhesu of Nazareth.

Notes

1. The label Anglo-Norman is here used to describe the victors of the Conquest who settled in England. Note that it is used, like Anglo-Saxon (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2), as a generic label for the different ethnic groups involved in the Norman invasion.
2. Schendl's (1997) investigation of skilled code-switching between Latin, English and French in sermons, religious prose texts, legal and medical texts, and business accounts, as well as in more literary productions such as macaronic (mixed) poems and drama, is of interest here.
3. Normandy was first taken by Philip Augustus of France in 1204. John tried to reclaim it in 1214 at the Battle of Bouvines but was unsuccessful.
4. Mufwene (2001) notes that Thomason has revised this.
5. See Chaudenson (2001: Chapter 3); Singh (2000: Chapter 2) for more detailed discussion.
6. The original theory of monogenesis postulated that the Atlantic creoles derived from a fifteenth-century proto-pidgin spoken on the West African coast. This West African Pidgin Portuguese (WAPP) allegedly combined 'African syntax' with a Portuguese lexicon. It was assumed that WAPP was learnt by slaves awaiting transportation in West Africa and taken by them to the Atlantic colonies. WAPP was then relexified in accordance with the dominant superstratal language in each environment. Thus, in British territories, the Portuguese lexicon of WAPP was exchanged for English, in French territories for French, and so on.
7. See also DeGraff (2001) for an interesting discussion of morphological processes in Haitian French Creole.